DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 314 UD 015 899

AUTHOR Sowell, Thomas; Bailey, Ronald Beresford
TITLE Opinions Differ on Black Studies.
INSTITUTION National Education Association, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 19p.; Reprinted from "Today's Education"
AVAILABLE FROM NEA Publications, Order Department, The Academic Building, Saw Mill Road, West Haven, Connecticut 06516 (Stock No. 0944-4-00)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Problems; *African American Studies; African Culture; African History; College Curriculum; College Programs; College Students; Educational Problems; Higher Education; Negro Culture; Negro Education; Negro History; *Negro Students; *Opinions; *Program Effectiveness; Program Evaluation; *Relevance (Education)

ABSTRACT

Although the systematic study of black people is much needed and long overdue, black studies programs as they exist are faced with problems and pressures concerning the way they have been created. Responding to black students demand for such programs, in some cases colleges have acted in haste and neither have recruited well-trained, intellectually accomplished scholars in black studies, nor students who have the command of language or of systematic analysis necessary to meet exacting standards. The particular direction these programs have taken can be understood against the background of the educational situation of black students and of the push for increased black enrollments, creating many cases of mismatchment of students with institutions. That the future of special black studies programs and departments looks grim is a viewpoint that is a viewpoint that is not shared by the second contributor to this pamphlet. Here, black studies are defended, for they represent the most likely institutional structure under which courses of and about blacks are best organized and taught. The problems of black studies can be solved through proper organization and scientific conceptualizations. Where universities are able to organize and staff good black studies programs, they should do so. (Author/AM)

Quick Reference:

BLACK STUDIES



# Opinions Differ on Black Studies

By THOMAS SOWELL
*and*
RONALD BERESFORD BAILEY



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National Education Association Publication

# Opinions Differ on Black Studies

## ONE VIEWPOINT

**By THOMAS SOWELL**
*Economist, Urban Institute, Washington, DC.*

☐ **Like everything human, black** studies is different in theory than in reality. The systematic study of black people—in the United States and/or around the world—is much needed and long overdue. This says nothing about whether black studies programs as they actually exist are doing a good job or a bad job, or whether they can be expected in the long run to contribute to the solutions or to the problems. It is significant that some outstanding scholars who have devoted their lives to the study of black people are among the bitterest critics of black studies programs.

The problems of black studies programs are not problems with the field of study but with the way these programs were created and the pressures generated within them. After years of ignoring the study of black people, colleges and universities all over the country suddenly started setting up black studies programs at the same time.

Since it takes many years to prepare and train a scholar and educator in any field, in no field can the supply of competent professors be increased quickly. If the schools had suddenly tried to increase their courses in astronomy or mathematics tenfold over-

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Dr. Sowell has taught economics at several universities. He expresses his concern for fellow blacks in his book, *Black Education Myths and Tragedies*, published in 1972 by David McKay Co., Inc.

night, these fields would also have suffered a sharp deterioration in quality. As they quickly exhausted the existing pool of scholars, they would have been forced to resort to those less qualified and ultimately to "warm bodies." This has been the fate of black studies—and it has nothing to do with the subject matter, only with the circumstances.

A crucial factor in the establishment of black studies programs has been the pressure of black students for such programs. This is why colleges and universities have acted in such haste and all at the same time. Students' influence over these departments has generally been much greater than their influence over traditional departments, and it is not uncommon in black studies departments for students to have either the power to select faculty or to veto appointments.

Leaving aside philosophical questions as to whether students *should* have such powers, the fact that they have much more power in black studies departments than in any other departments makes black studies a less attractive option to faculty members who are good enough to be able to pick and choose among competing offers. There is no attraction in having a job in which continuation and promotion depend on saying what the students want to hear.

Perhaps the greatest handicap to recruiting well-trained and intellectually accomplished scholars as black studies faculty members is simply the low quality of

such programs to begin with. Any organization tends to attract people similar to those who are already in that organization.

At the outset, there were simply not enough real scholars to man all the black studies programs that were created overnight. But even as more able and well-trained young scholars in black history, black sociology, and so on have come out of top graduate schools, they have tended to avoid black studies programs that would make them colleagues of men who were selected for their ideology or charisma and who have little or no academic standing in the college or university.

The reluctance of talented scholars to accept appointments that would compromise their own standing or development is sometimes matched by a reluctance of black studies departments to hire such persons even when they are available.

In some cases, the college or university has recruited many black students who lack the command of language or of systematic analysis necessary to meet exacting standards. The institution is then driven by the logic of the situation to seek similarly deficient teachers and administrators of special programs as people to whom the students can "relate."

At some institutions, black scholars with strong academic records have been rejected for such positions precisely because of their competence. In more extreme cases, black studies officials have acquired a voice or a veto in the selection of black faculty

members in *other* departments, and again they seek people like themselves rather than people who are an implicit threat to what they represent.

Enrollment in black studies courses has usually been well below anyone's expectations. The number of black students who fought for the establishment of such programs typically far exceeds the number who regularly enroll in black studies courses, much less major in the subject.

This is very revealing—not only in regard to the quality of these programs and the black students' realistic assessments of them—but also in regard to the reasons behind the original drive to set up such programs. The *symbolic* value of black studies was enormous—as a focus for black student feelings and frustrations. There was never any corresponding urgency about its educational aspect, despite some rhetorical flourishes; and the disappointing quality of what emerged did nothing to create a demand.

In some cases, exclusions of white students on grounds that they could not possibly understand "the black experience" have been rescinded when pathetically small enrollments of black students have threatened the jobs of the black studies faculty.

The drive to set up black studies programs and the particular direction these programs took can be understood only against the background of the educational situation of black students generally and of the sudden push for increased black enrollments in

colleges and universities.

Many black students have simply not received the kind of education necessary to prepare them for demanding college work, such as that required at Ivy League colleges. There is no need here to assess the relative amounts of blame that should go to the school system, the home, and so forth. There is more than enough blame for everybody. The important fact is that many black students enter college with numerous and serious educational handicaps.

Moreover, the special programs that are set up for black students are oriented toward the question, "What can Harvard (or Yale or Amherst) do to maintain its visibility as an educational leader?" The question is almost never posed in terms of where and in what way the black students can get the best education, in the light of their actual circumstances.

If the central subject were, in fact, the black student rather than the institution and if the approach were to place him where his needs would be best served (rather than to achieve an institutionally acceptable racial body count), it is almost inconceivable that so many black students would be enrolled at universities celebrated for their research output or at elite colleges geared to students who have been prepared for the experience since they were out of diapers.

The preoccupation of the academic world with invidious, and often simpleminded, comparisons has led to the implicit notion that there are bad, good, and best schools and that admission is

a question of who "deserves" to be where. In this context, people often "justify" the admission of black students for whom the institution is wholly unsuitable on grounds that it is not the students' "fault" that they do not meet its standards.

The real question—whether the institution meets their needs—is seldom asked, or if it is asked, it is asked in the Utopian sense of seeking to change the institution so that it will cease to be what it is in order to accommodate one portion of its student body. Realistically, this is not going to happen, except in the limited sense that a great research university may find it expedient to set up a separate and unequal program to keep the black students quiet while the university goes about its real business. This is as unnecessary as it is dishonest and destructive.

Everyone does not get a "better" education at a "better" institution—particularly when the institution's reputation is built on its research output, as top reputations are. Many students—white or black—can learn more in an introductory economics course at Wabash College than at Harvard or M.I.T. A student may learn little or nothing at an institution that assumes he has an educational background which he just does not have.

Certainly a course geared to students with a solid math background and or high reading speeds is soon going to lose anyone without these assets, however much "native ability" he may have. The drive of top institutions to fill their quota (avoiding this

word like the plague, of course) has led to a mismatching of black students and educational institutions all up and down the line.

If the Ivy League colleges, because they want a good body count, drain off the black students of state college caliber, then the state colleges will have to get black students who do not meet their standards, unless they want to fall behind in the numbers game.

So it goes, all down the academic pecking order with the net result that great numbers of black students are in over their heads academically and struggling to stay afloat.

The pressures generated by this mismatching are severe. For many a black student, academic problems are compounded by his feeling guilty at having personal advantages over family and friends back in the ghetto. This guilt creates a need to demonstrate to others—and to himself—that he has not sold out, that he is not going to be scared, duped, or corrupted by The Man.

Pressures of a different sort are felt by college officials caught in a cross fire between angry faculty members concerned about standards and militants demanding higher body counts. In this situation, black studies is a political godsend.

Through black studies, students who cannot meet high standards are given low standards; students without the background for academic work can engage in rap sessions instead; students who have trouble relating to whites can segregate themselves with

blacks. Of course, what is politically optimal is not educationally optimal, much less socially optimal. It is, in fact, a massive sweeping of problems under the rug. The most hopeful sign is that many black students themselves see this.

The future of special black studies programs and departments looks grim. Small enrollments make their survival a problem, while the inadequate qualifications of most black studies faculties (compared to those of either blacks or whites in traditional departments) make their alternative opportunities for employment too poor to expect them to accept the loss of their jobs without resort to demagoguery.

However, the future of black studies as an avenue of intellectual inquiry looks far more promising. Much interest has been generated in the subject, and it is being pursued by increasing numbers of able scholars outside of black studies programs. The decline and demise of those programs should in fact improve the prospects of fruitful inquiry in this field. □

## ANOTHER VIEWPOINT

**By RONALD BERESFORD BAILEY**
*American Council on Education Fellow in Academic Administration, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton.*

☐ **In 1970 I wrote a short article** in defense of black studies programs. ("Why Black Studies?" *Saint Louis University Magazine*, Winter, 1970; condensed and reprinted in *The Education Digest*, May, 1970). Essentially, I

argued that black studies is concerned with the history and culture of a people and, on that basis alone, is a worthy undertaking.

I also argued that black studies programs represent the most likely institutional structure under which courses of and about blacks might best be organized and taught, since traditionally organized university, college, and school departments generally ignore the role of blacks in the American experience. In short, I argued that since black people were placed beyond the academic pale, it was better to have the history of black people taught separately, rather than not at all.

In his book, *Black Education: Myths and Tragedies*, Thomas Sowell highlights most if not all of the shortcomings of black studies programs, as he knows them, and he argues rather convincingly. Nevertheless, in view of his lack of documentation it seems fair to assume that his remarks on black studies programs are based largely on his personal experiences and discussions with unidentified individuals rather than from research and investigation as defined by usual academic standards.

Sowell has a duty to construct a more systematic (perhaps a survey-type) tool to confirm or deny the validity of his experiences and those of the individuals with whom he conferred. Otherwise, there is no way to determine how accurately the problems he discusses typify black studies

Dr. Bailey, also a black, is a political scientist. His faculty experience at several universities includes both teaching in and supervising black studies and special services programs.

programs throughout the country.

I would be remiss, however, if I did not quickly add that I tend to agree with some of Sowell's conclusions. As one who has both taught in and supervised black studies and special services programs, I have faced some of the problems he has discussed. Nevertheless, the question of how pervasive or how fundamental these problems are in the universities throughout the country is still left to conjecture.

Second, I do not find my belief in the need for black studies programs and Sowell's criticism of them to be contradictory. He and I are talking about two different aspects of the same problem. We disagree, I believe, in what to do about that problem.

I am saying that the history of black people should be taught and that, given the American academic milieu, black studies programs represent the most likely programs in which a concentrated effort can be made to accomplish this goal.

Sowell, it seems to me, is saying that because of the way in which many have been created, organized, and run and, especially, because of some of the personnel selected to be in charge, black studies programs have not taught the history of black people very well. These programs, he claims, have been, by and large, a disservice rather than a service to the teaching of and about black people.

Up to this point, Sowell and I are not in any substantial disagreement. Indeed, insofar as my limited experiences go, I am of the

opinion that he is correct when he concludes that some of the programs are not serving very useful purposes as they are presently constructed and administered. However, Sowell and I part company with regard to the solution or solutions to the problems he describes.

I infer that he sees only two real options for the black studies faculty member (a) to accept academic inferiority or (b) to promote nonacademic goals. Another option would be not to abandon black studies programs but to strengthen them in terms of their organization and functions until they are as academically sound and command as much respect as the traditional disciplines.

The problems of black studies, it seems to me, are soluble. First, the problem of too many hastily and ill-constructed black studies programs can be solved by recognizing that some universities are not large enough or financially secure enough to house a respectable black studies department.

Those universities that can establish good black studies programs should do so; the remaining institutions should select a number of core courses on blacks and incorporate these courses into traditional fields of study. For example, a course entitled, say, "The History of Black Americans from Slavery to Freedom" might best be taught in the history department. Another core course on "The Politics of Inequality" might best be taught by political science.

In short, where universities are able to organize and staff good black studies programs, they should do so. In instances where

this is not possible, core courses of and about blacks ought to be added in traditional fields of study.

In this same vein, university officials responsible for hiring faculty for these programs should, as in any other program, seek out those who are academically prepared to do the job. These well-qualified blacks would have no need to politicize the students, at the expense of educating them, in order to establish a power base for themselves.

By the same token, and this is a real problem, university officials must come out from behind such cliches as "I can't find any qualified blacks." This kind of game only infuriates blacks, who often respond by engaging in some form of protest. Administrators, in turn, then rush to hire blacks. It is precisely in such an atmosphere that the less able people are engaged. Administrators must understand this phenomenon and seek out the academically qualified before crisis-type situations occur.

Second, it must be made clear to black students that while black student protest movements helped hasten the birth of black studies programs, these programs and the personnel in them cannot be subjected to every whim of every black student. Black students should have inputs into these as well as other university programs, but they should not be allowed the final word on the chairman and professors or the course offerings and how they are to be taught.

In short, black students who want good programs must recognize that having a hundred

different voices advise how these programs should be organized and run does not help the success index. Rather, such activity only serves to chase away the more able and educationally oriented professors, who refuse to be subjected to such antiintellectual nonsense. This, in turn, hastens the demise of the programs.

Third, a number of scholars who have expertise in black studies should come together in some way and draw up a model black studies curriculum outlining courses by name and briefly describing the probable contents of each.

They might also suggest the type of academic training one should have either to direct these programs or to teach the courses outlined in the model curriculum. This would serve to eliminate the "God called me" types, who no more belong in the educational system than they did in the pulpits or, in more recent times, in the political arena.

Finally, expediency-minded administrators, as well as the incompetents they have hired, should be weeded out. They must be replaced, however, by individuals who are not only academically secure but who are also fully aware of the need for and the right of black folks to have their history and culture taught and taught honestly.

I do not believe that the solution to the problems of black studies programs is to dismantle them any more than I believe that schools of education or departments of sociology, which, Sowell observes in his book, do not enjoy high status in the academic

community, should be dismantled.

Rather, I believe that black studies programs have some very necessary and important functions to perform. To dismantle the programs would mean only that some other means, with a new set of problems, would have to be devised in order that the history of blacks be taught.

The history of black people must continue to be recorded and taught, no matter what. For without black studies, the myths and tragedies, the hopes and fears, the dreams and realities of a people might very well be condemned to obscurity. No group of people can afford this.

Black studies programs, freed of their problems, properly organized and scientifically conceived, will remove the historical and cultural void in which blacks often find themselves.

Blacks and whites (my teaching experiences tell me that whites are also helped by black studies) will come to know and understand black history and culture objectively from those blacks and, I dare say, unbiased white professionals who have a thorough knowledge of African-American history and culture.

Through black studies, black students and white students will be introduced to such scientifically oriented scholars as W.E.B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Charles H. Wesley, John Hope Franklin, Herbert Aptheker, Rayford Logan, J. Saunders Redding, E. Franklin Frazier, Martin Jenkins, Loren Miller, August Meier, Elliott Rudwick, Benjamin Quarles, St. Clair Drake, Kenneth B. Clark,

Matthew Holden, Jr., Harold Rose, Joanne Grant, Charles Hamilton, Harold Cruse, Vincent Harding, Harry A. Bailey, Jr., Thomas R. Dye, Melvin Drimmer, Eric Foner, Lerone Bennett, Jr., and Louis Harlan. Indeed, they will also get to meet Thomas Sowell.

What I am saying is that many of the names of the aforementioned individuals, both blacks and whites, would not even be recognized were it not for their research efforts on the world of African-Americans. Somehow, therefore, it seems inconceivable that all of this excellent research should be done on black people and then not be disseminated by some such means as a black studies program.

Thus, I am sure that the distinguished black scholars who, Sowell says in his book, have criticized black studies programs could not be against studying and teaching about black folks, for they themselves have engaged in both of these activities.

Rather, not unlike Sowell, they have undoubtedly criticized the way in which some of these programs are presently constructed. I can understand this criticism. Constructive criticism is good for the soul. With it, black studies programs can be improved.

Can we not then go about the important business of restructuring those black studies programs in need of it so that they may serve their intended purposes of teaching and research? After all, if we don't have black studies in the classroom, the history of a people will be relegated to dusty library shelves. □

*The future of special black studies programs and departments looks grim.*

*Those universities that can establish good black studies programs should do so.*



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No. 0944-4-00